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SUBJECT: SOHN HAK-KYU LEAVES THE GNP: POLITICAL FUTURE OVER?

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Sohn Hak-kyu announced March 19 that he was leaving the GNP to create a "new political order." While at it, he took a swipe at the GNP, calling the opposition party full of "obsolete conservatives" with "incapable warriors from the Cold War." The announcement came after several days of well staged "will-he-or-won't he" front-page debate while Sohn was on a retreat at a Buddhist temple. Most pundits assessed that Sohn stood no chance of capturing the GNP nomination, because he was so far behind front runners Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye in the polls. Still, coming after repeated promises that he would not quit the party, Sohn's exit is something of a surprise. Although the Uri Party would welcome him as a well-known figure to support their otherwise weakened political state, Sohn remains aloof for now, saying, "the government must be replaced, but a replacement is not enough, if it means a return to the past." GNP Chairman Kang Jae-sup called for Sohn to cancel his announcement and come back to the party. The current bet is that Sohn will eventually join a new "third" party, aligning himself with centrists from Uri, the Democratic Party, and anyone else against GNP or Roh Moo-hyun. END SUMMARY

SOHN STEPS OUT

12. (SBU) Former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn Hak-kyu left the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) on March 19 in hopes of leading a new reform party and challenging the GNP candidate in the December 19 presidential elections. According to leading political analyst Park Song-min, Sohn has no future outside of the party under whose banner he was a lawmaker, minister and governor. Kang Won-taek, a leading political scientist and election observer, noted that Sohn's departure will strengthen the GNP's conservative base. Sohn has trailed Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye in all polls since he started his campaign July 2006 and never went above six percent support in any polls. (NOTE: Lee maintains over 40 percent support in all polls and Park over 20 percent. END NOTE) However, many polls have suggested that Sohn would do well as the ruling party candidate since no ruling party candidate polls above three percent.

WHY DID HE GO?

13. (C) According to some of our National Assembly contacts,

former President Kim Dae-jung and possibly President Roh encouraged Sohn to leave the GNP. A favorite of journalists and academics, Sohn has been advised by many leading political thinkers that he could lead a third party. Also, centrist Uri Party lawmakers with close personal ties to Sohn, such as Rep. Kim Boo-kyum, have been soliciting Sohn's leadership of a new party. Pundits assume that two main external factors led to Sohn's departure; (1) the constant encouragement from a wide range of ruling party politicians and influential journalists and academics and (2) the perceived pressure from the GNP leadership on Sohn's followers to stay in the party and to support one of the two main candidates (Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak). One internal factor can also not be dismissed - Sohn's ego. Sohn told poloff multiple times in 2006 that he was the most qualified presidential candidate and in the end, "it would come down to me versus Lee Myung-bak."

POSITIVE RESULT?

¶4. (C) According to Sohn's policy team leader, Lee Yun-saeng, the wide-spread criticism that most conservative papers and leaders have heaped on Sohn in the 24 hours since his departure from the GNP was expected, and that by late April, Sohn could form a new party, overcome criticism related to his defection and emerge as a strong challenger to Lee and Park. Sohn's goal is to enter an open primary in September as the centrist party candidate against other ruling party/progressive candidates, Lee said. Many speculate that a coalition party will be difficult to form, but they acknowledge that an open primary is a must if the progressives hope to challenge the eventual GNP candidate. According to Lee, many in the Uri Party have assured Sohn privately that they will support his candidacy.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) If the past is any guide, Sohn's departure from the party that gave him his political career will spell the end of his political life. In 1997, Rhee In-jae, who left the GNP in 1997 after losing the primary to Lee Hoi-chang, has not been able to shed the stigma surrounding his defection. Sohn has already picked up the nickname "Sohn In-jae." Many thought Sohn had great prospects for a successful run for the presidency in 2012 if he had supported this year's eventual GNP candidate. Sohn's actions underline again that "next time" is not in the Korean political jargon. Sohn believes he has a shot at the Blue House, mostly because Koreans, like all voters, want to encourage underdogs. Still, Sohn's departure has sparked a new interest in the presidential sweepstakes, not that South Koreans need such encouragement.

VERSHBOW